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SUBJECT: "DISSIDENT WRITERS" RECEIVE STATE AWARDS

1. (SBU) Summary: Hoang Cam, Le Dat, Phung Quan and Tran Dan, four writers who belonged to an anti-government intellectual circle in the 1950's, and who were long censored and even jailed by the GVN, recently received one of Vietnam's top artistic prizes for their work. However, GVN officials have rejected the thought that the awards serve as public apology from the government. Local observers believe State President Nguyen Minh Triet himself was a strong advocate of the prizes, and intellectuals are hopeful that this will bode well for even greater "intellectual freedom." End Summary.

Awards Announced

2. (U) In 1954, North Vietnamese writers Hoang Cam, Le Dat, Phung Quan and Tran Dan worked for the independent journal Nhan Van Giai Pham ("Beautiful Flowers of Humanism"). The journal published articles and poems that criticized government land reform efforts and called for greater freedom in literature and the arts. In late 1956, the government shut down the journal and cracked down on its writers; the four were long censored and, for a time, jailed by the government. After the Doi Moi ("Renovation") period began in 1986, these writers were allowed to resume their memberships in the Vietnam Writers' Association, and many of their works were re-published (although many remain banned). In February 2007, the GVN formally awarded them "State Awards," one of Vietnam's top artistic prizes.

3. (SBU) One example of the previously banned, and now rewarded, works is Phung Quan's "Loi Me Dan" (Mother's Preaching), which was just recently listed among Vietnam's most popular poems of the 20th century by a project launched by the Ministry of Education and Training. In this poem, first published in 1957, Quan called for writers to be honest citizens who should only listen to their conscience rather than orders given to them by the authorities. Because of this poem, Quan was denounced as a counter-revolutionary by Party ideologues, who stressed the primacy of the Party in overseeing literature and arts.

4. (U) Of the four authors, only Hoang Cam and Le Dat are still alive. Speaking to the press after the awards announcement, Cam and Dat said the awards came too late, but "better late than never." Dat quoted a member of the State Council in charge of vetting nominees as having told him that the awards should serve as "an apology to the writers from the State Council." For his part, Hoang Cam, whose popularity recently increased after one of his most famous plays was staged in Hanoi, said he would not reject the awards. "It would be ridiculous if we rejected the awards. We deserve the awards, for we've got works that have good values," he said.

GVN Rejects Apology Claim

5. (SBU) Speaking to the press, Le Tien Tho, Vice Minister of Culture and Information and Vice Chairman of the State Council,

asserted that the State Council member who reportedly said the awards constitute an apology "must have been joking" at the time. Tho said the awards were granted to the four writers for their "specific outstanding works" and noted that the award citations clearly reference these works.

¶6. (SBU) On the question of whether the awards represent an "apology," a senior professor at a prominent local think-tank said that, by definition, the decision to award these authors constitutes a re-evaluation and reversal by the Party, if not an outright apology. According to this contact, President Triet signed a separate decision to grant the prizes to the group of four writers, while issuing another decision to grant the same awards to 154 other writers. Many intellectuals in Hanoi interpret this to mean that Triet, a "supporter of greater national reconciliation and more democracy within the Party," actually nominated the authors himself, our contact surmised.

Comment

¶7. (SBU) Although the Party and GVN have never withdrawn their criticism of individual writers affiliated with the Nhan Van Giai Pham journal, its post-Doi Moi removal of restrictions on them and its recent high-profile efforts to grant them awards have raised hope among some Vietnamese intellectuals for "improved intellectual freedom and democracy in Vietnam." How this effort will square with the current crackdown on political dissent remains to be seen.

MARINE